PRODUCTION INFORMATION

DISNEY'S "LAUNCHPAD," streaming exclusively on Disney+ beginning May 28, is a collection of live-action shorts from a new generation of dynamic storytellers. Six filmmakers from underrepresented backgrounds were selected out of more than 1,100 applicants from all over the U.S. and provided with the opportunity to share their perspectives and creative visions that will show audiences what it means to be seen.

The goal of DISNEY'S "LAUNCHPAD" is to diversify the types of stories that are being told and to give access to those who have historically not had it. Inspired by life's journey, these first six shorts for Disney+ are based on the theme "Discover."

Each filmmaker was assigned executive mentors from the various studio brand units, including Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures Production, Walt Disney Animation Studios, Disney+, Lucasfilm, Marvel Studios and Pixar. Here's what some of them had to say about the Launchpad program:

"Launchpad was really an incredible experience, and as a mentor I feel so lucky to have been part of something that feels like there is actually a shift in culture and perspective at this company. I have learned so much and honestly feel that I was the mentee just as much as I was the mentor. It is something I hope that each and every development executive has the opportunity to be part

of something that is dedicated and committed to bringing about genuine change within these antiquated institutions and systems. I learned that it is possible to go beyond the dialogue and to be part of the movement that is trying to move our company in a better direction."
—Karen Chau (Director of Development, Disney Branded Television)

"It has been an honor and a joy to participate in the Launchpad program with our inspiring group of directors and the committed team around them. Launchpad serves as an example of the power of inclusive storytelling and reinforces the fundamental importance of diverse voices whose stories must be seen and supported."
—Vanessa Morrison (President, Streaming, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures Production)

"While I knew we were working with a group of talented filmmakers, I was struck by their unrelenting enthusiasm, optimism and entrepreneurialism, especially when faced with the challenges of making these films during a pandemic. These filmmakers have incredible vision and voice, and their passion is infectious. I'm grateful to have been a part of what I'm sure will be long, successful careers for all of our filmmakers."
—Rachel Yeung (Director, Production)

MAHIN IBRAHIM, Director of Disney's Diversity & Inclusion, Market, who oversees the "LAUNCHPAD" program, said, "This first group of shorts by these six gifted filmmakers took our breath away. They are moving, provocative and entertaining, and they each convey a unique perspective on living in America today and the things you learn about yourself and others when you follow your own path. I am excited to share them with you, and I look forward to welcoming a new group of filmmakers from underrepresented backgrounds for our next season of Disney's 'LAUNCHPAD.'"

Ibrahim was previously at Refinery29 in development/production and spent the majority of her career at Google and YouTube, where she helped run production programs with an emphasis on diversity and inclusion at its flagship studio for YouTube creators. In addition, she writes creative nonfiction, and holds an MFA in production from USC and a BA in mass communication and business administration from UC Berkeley.

PHILLIP YAW DOMFEH is the Senior Manager of Disney's "LAUNCHPAD" shorts Incubator and a writer, director and producer from Los Angeles, Calif.

Prior to joining The Walt Disney Studios, he served as an executive producer of the 2019 AT&T Mentorship Program. There, he worked alongside Emmy® Award winner Lena Waithe and Rishi Rajani to mentor underrepresented filmmakers and produce five short films starring Dascha Polanco, Loretta Devine and Rob Morgan.

His debut comedy short film, "Rudeboy's Restaurant," was financed by Little Ugly, Vimeo, Dolby Labs and Ghetto Film School through the 2019 Emerge! Filmmaker Lab Short Film Competition

and premiered August 2020 as part of the American Black Film Festival 2020 Emerging Directors Showcase.

Prior to Emerge!, Phillip was a Comedy Finalist in the 2019/2020 ABC | Disney Writers Program and a Semi-Finalist in the 2018 Fox Writers Lab.

Submissions for the second season of Disney's "LAUNCHPAD," which will be based around the theme of "Connection" and will include a writers' track, will be accepted now through June 11, 2021: https://launchpad.disney.com/

SEASON ONE SHORTS

Written and Directed by **AQSA ALTAF**
Produced by LESLIE OWEN, STEAK HOUSE
Cast: SHANESSA KHAWAJA, JENNA QURESHI, CASH HERRERA, FAZEELAT ASLAM

Ameena, a Muslim Pakistani immigrant, wakes up on Eid to find out that she has to go to school. Homesick and heartbroken, she goes on a mission to make Eid a public-school holiday, and in the process reconnects with her older sister and embraces her new home, while her new home embraces her.

Los Angeles–based filmmaker **AQSA ALTAF** loves to capture moments that feel like they are stolen from everyday life with a cinematic edge. Being raised in Kuwait by Pakistani and Sri Lankan parents in a Muslim household, Aqsa is fascinated with telling stories that are diverse in nature and reflect on subject matters that are universal.

Aqsa graduated from USC School of Cinematic Arts. Her short film "One Small Step" has won many awards and played at the American Pavilion at the Cannes Film Festival 2019. It was also shortlisted for the BAFTA Student Film Awards.

She was nominated for the Young Director Award 2019 at Cannes Lions for her film, which she made under the mentorship of Werner Herzog.

She is currently developing a TV series based on a proof-of-concept film she made as well as her first feature project.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT:

I started writing "American Eid" because I always wanted to see a Disney film about Eid—a holiday so special to me as a Muslim that I never saw represented on mainstream media. I remember pondering as a little girl growing up in Kuwait why we don't have stories about people who look like me and have a life like mine. Everything I watched educated me about a world that wasn't the world I or anyone around me lived in. I also remember subconsciously concluding that maybe our stories were not worth the mainstream platform.

Retrospectively, thinking back at that scares me. To have those thoughts lingering in a young person is not only limiting but also corrosive. This is why "American Eid" is so important to me. When your culture, holiday, and traditions are celebrated on mainstream platform, it sends a message—it says you matter, your identity matters, your specificities are beautiful and worth being told.

The more I explored the film in development, the more I realized that the core heart of this film is about acceptance. Acceptance of your new home, which I myself had to do immigrating to the U.S. But it is also about your new home accepting you for who you are. It is a two-way street. Home is where you belong but it is also where you get to be you unapologetically.

Ever since I moved to the U.S., I spent every Eid without my family. I never got to travel back home during Eid because it always fell in the middle of a semester or a film project which made it impossible for me to take a week off to travel all the way across the world. I felt so alone during a holiday that I grew up counting down days to. Most of my colleagues and non-Muslim friends didn't even know what Eid was, what it stood for or what it signified. And ultimately what I didn't realize until I made this film is how much I had normalized not celebrating Eid with my family, not taking the days off for it, and not bringing more awareness to it.

"American Eid" is about Ameena trying to reconnect with her sister by trying to keep Eid alive in their new lives, and she ends up learning that some things in life, like her sister, will change and that's okay, but ultimately what matters is that you stand for what you believe in and celebrate you for who you are.

I hope "American Eid" starts a conversation about acknowledging holidays from different cultures and religions, about why it's important to do so, and why we as a society need to make the effort to educate ourselves.

DINNER IS SERVED

Directed by **HAO ZHENG**
Written by G. WILSON & HAO ZHENG
Produced by SHINCY LU, STEAK HOUSE
Cast: QI SUN, BRIANA LIU, BEN WANG, HARRY JARVIS, RAY WISE, DeJEAN BROWN

A Chinese student at an elite U.S. boarding school realizes excellence is not enough when he tries out for a leadership position no international student has ever applied for.

HAO ZHENG studied at Emerson College (film production) and AFI (directing). He is a recent Student Academy Award–winning director transitioned from being a professional actor in popular Chinese films and TV shows. With short films getting international recognition including Show Me Shorts New Zealand (Best International Film Award), AT&T Film Award, Nowness Awards, Short Shorts Tokyo, Aspen Shortsfest among more than 100 film festivals, he is developing a range of multicultural projects in both China and the U.S.

Recently, Hao became a 2021 Forbes 30 Under 30 Honoree (Hollywood & Entertainment), 2020 HBOAccess Directing Fellow and a 2019 First International Film Festival Directing Lab Fellow.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT:

In the fall of 2009, I started studying at a private boarding school in Long Island, New York. As a 15-year-old boy growing up in China, I never thought that one day I would become a minority in a completely different world where I would feel alienated, lonely and unnoticed. I desperately wanted to change my situation and be seen by others. In my mind, the only way to do so was to try out for the leadership positions, especially the Maitre D' position, a role no international student has ever tried before due to its very nature of having to present a monologue in front of everyone at dinner and remembering everyone's name. As someone who often got laughed at for having an accent when speaking English, I took out my dictionary, recorded my lines and repeated them over and over again to make sure there were no flaws.

However, despite my belief that hard works pay off, a mispronunciation during my tryout got me laughed at again. Even though I still managed to keep my smile, my mind went completely blank and I started making more mistakes until the moment I felt I would never get the position. I felt angry, not because I made mistakes but because I couldn't do anything when my accent got laughed at. Having nothing to lose, a strange idea came to my mind. I walked to the front, rang the bell and got everyone's attention. Then I started singing with my full passion in Chinese as a

way to rebel. It's weird, I know. But for some reason, I felt happy. And for a brief moment, I didn't care about what others think and didn't try to get anyone's validation. I was just being me.

"Dinner Is Served" is a film that is full of youthful energy, pain and happiness. We all have similar experiences of getting into a new environment, forcing ourselves to fit in and trying to prove ourselves. However, what we actually need is not to prove ourselves but to simply find who we actually are and to be ourselves. This is the topic "Dinner Is Served" tries to explore. I hope that when you see this character full of persistence and energy, you will also see your own youth.

GROWING FANGS

Written and Directed by **ANN MARIE PACE**
Produced by GENEVA FAYE, MELODY SANDOVAL, STEAK HOUSE
Cast: KEYLA MONTERROSO MEJIA, CRISTELA ALONZO, GRACE SONG, OLIVIA SULLIVENT

Val Garcia, a Mexican American teen who is half human/half vampire, has had to keep her identity a secret from both worlds. But when her human best friend shows up at her monster-infested school, she has to confront her truth, her identity and herself.

ANN MARIE PACE is an employee of The Walt Disney Company. She is a writer/director raised in Tennessee and based in Los Angeles. Growing up Mexican American and bisexual, she is drawn to stories of identity and discovering your inner truth when you don't just fit one box. Raised in a family of anthropologists, Ann Marie puts an immense amount of care and consideration into being authentic to characters, their culture and their truths. She tells stories from multicultural perspectives to help create bridges of understanding. She received her MFA in directing at UCLA. Her thesis film, "Beyond the Gate," shot in the Brazilian Amazon, won first place in the DGA Student Film Awards Latino Category, Best Student Film at the Brazil International Film Festival, and was a Caucus Foundation Grant Winner.

<u>DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT:</u>

Being in between identities is something I know a lot about. My mother is Mexican and my father is white, so culturally I grew up with a mix of traditions. I also grew up in a small town in Tennessee where there weren't many other kids at school who looked like me. I learned quickly that in order to fit in there, I had to hide my Mexican side. And at the same time, I also felt not Mexican enough. I struggled with Spanish and couldn't speak to my Mexican grandma, who lived right next door, for the first 20 years of my life. When I finally learned, I almost cried realizing how I might never have known how hilarious (and inappropriate) my grandma's jokes are.

And then there was a huge part of my identity I felt too ashamed to accept until much later in life, my bisexuality. Once again, it felt as if I was in between two identities. Too gay to be straight, too straight to be gay, and too ashamed to accept my bisexuality fully.

This struggle of duality is what I wanted to explore with Val. But I wanted to tell this story in a way that still celebrates the very things about her that I was made to feel ashamed of growing up. That's why it felt important to me that Val's Mexican and queer parts of herself are normalized and celebrated, and instead her complex with identity revolves around being half vampire. I've always felt the monster story is essentially an outsider's story of wanting to be understood and accepted but being feared by those who don't know enough about you. Which is something anyone who has ever felt like an outsider can relate to.

At times, when we belong to multiple identities, it can ironically feel like we don't belong anywhere. That's what Val's journey is about, as she discovers what became a profound realization in my own life—that the most important thing is to belong to yourself.

Written and Directed by **STEFANIE ABEL HOROWITZ**
Produced by SYDNEY FLEISCHMANN, STEAK HOUSE
Cast: OTMARA MARRERO, DASH McCLOUD, GREG WORSWICK, MIKE MILLAN

Avalon's not ready to process the loss of her mother, but when she's put in charge of a 4-year-old for one night, she finds more comfort than she ever could have expected.

STEFANIE ABEL HOROWITZ directed theater for a decade before pivoting to film. Her second short film, "Sometimes, I Think About Dying," premiered at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival, traveled the world on the Sundance Shorts Tour**,** garnered Abel Horowitz the Future Filmmaker Award from Palm Springs International Film Festival and was shortlisted for an Academy Award®. She is an alum of the 2019 New Voices Sundance Lab as well as a member of Lincoln Center Directors Lab. Her essay "He's Your Destiny. Just Be Patient." was published in The New York Times' Modern Love 2019 column.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT:

My parents are 69 and 70. Neither one is happy about it. And when I look at their faces, I see my grandparents. My mother's skin is beginning to sag below her chin and my father's lips are so reminiscent of his father's I feel like I'm looking at him. And they are grandparents, to my nephew, who is turning 3 soon. They're entering their final chapter of life. They're talking about retiring, about life slowing down, about watching the light change.

And I worry about myself dying more often than I used to. The universality of death, the absolute inevitability of it–it's on my mind.

When I was in my early 20s I babysat for a 3-year-old. Babysitting was new to me; I'd had other kinds of teenage jobs and wasn't used to being a caregiver. But he was incredibly smart and incredibly sweet. He knew bubbles were delicate and he loved with abandon.

One time he pretended to shoot me dead and I found myself explaining to him what death meant. That he'd never get to see me again. That I wouldn't come to babysit him anymore. That I would be gone. I watched his face change, his heart break just a little.

At that age children can't fully understand death. They can't understand concepts like permanence and universality. But when I told him I wouldn't be able to come see him anymore he certainly understood that. And, I don't know, I always felt like I had broken some little piece of innocence in him that he would never get back. A piece that has to break in all of us and leaves only the sad truth that we will all one day be gone and we will never come back.

In this movie a little boy learns about death while his babysitter is confronted with her own sense of loss. But what are kids if not the ultimate reminder that we have so much to live for?

THE LAST OF THE CHUPACABRAS

Written and Directed by **JESSICA MENDEZ SIQUEIROS**
Produced by NICOLE CRESPO, STEAK HOUSE
Cast: MELBA MARTINEZ, PhD, CICI LAU, SEVEN TRUE-DIVINE PURNELL, WILLIAM KNIGHT

In a world where culture has nearly ceased to exist, one lone Mexican American struggling to carry on her traditions unknowingly summons a dark and ancient creature to protect her.

JESSICA MENDEZ SIQUEIROS is a Chicana writer/director of mixed indigenous Sonoran and European ancestry seeking to normalize complex and authentic narratives about the Southwest Mexican American community through film. Her short films have screened at over 75 festivals, including Palm Springs, Seattle, Cleveland, Hamptons and the Los Angeles Latino Film Festival. They have garnered an Audience Pick from Palm Springs ShortFest, the KidsEye Grand Prize for Best Live Action Short from Flickers Rhode Island Film Festival, Best Narrative Short (Comedy) from Cinequest, among other awards. Selected as a director mentee in the AT&T Hello Lab Mentorship Program, she directed "Adeline, The Great" under the guidance of Lena Waithe and Rishi Rajani.

Her first feature film, "Reforma," which delves into the colorful, complicated world of a young Latina woman in La Reforma (the Tucson, Ariz., projects) in the 1960s, is in development with the support of the Sundance Feature Film Program, and the recipient of the 2021 Latinx Fellowship. She will also participate in the second class of Powderkeg Fuse helmed by Paul Feig & Lisa Fischer.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT:
As a little girl, I would constantly tug at my mother's sleeve in Mexican markets. "What does that mean?," I'd ask with my finger thrust out at every object we passed. Even as a proud Mexican woman, my mom had been taught from a young age that her language was a burden, that there was no need to speak it outside of her home, that she needed to be more American.

So, I never learned.

"The Last of the Chupacabras" is a vibrant & darkly comedic visualization of the dangers of this type of mentality when looking at our individual cultures. While the Earth grows more global in its mindset by the day, it is important that we stop and take a moment to celebrate what makes us unique.

Chepa's journey to realizing she is not alone is one that I have experienced myself. One where I have discovered others, just like me, from every race, ethnicity and economic status that have lost some part of their identity.

The film is a celebration of our broken hearts coming together to rekindle our heritages.

Written and Directed by **MOXIE PENG**
Produced by CARVER DISERENS, STEAK HOUSE
Cast: KALO MOSS, CHING YIN RYAN HU, EVAN LAI, BRIAN YANG, LYNN CHEN, DANNI WANG

When Gabriel, a 7-year-old Chinese kid who loves ballet, becomes friends with Rob, another Chinese kid from school, Rob's dad gets suspicious about Gabriel's feminine behavior and decides to intervene.

MOXIE PENG is a writer and director from Hunan, China. As a queer non-binary filmmaker, Moxie chooses subjects that are often from the working class, immigrant ethnic minorities and folks in the queer community, and they often address intersectionality among them. They started filmmaking in Beijing and now live in New York City and Los Angeles. Their shorts have been screened at NewFest, Asian American International Film Festival, Cleveland International Film Festival and more. Moxie recently graduated from the Filmmaking MFA program at NYU class of 2020, and is developing their debut feature.

<u>DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT:</u>
Acceptance is the first step towards healing.

"The Little Prince(ss)" is based on a true story of acceptance that happened to me when I was a child. Growing up in China, I was constantly questioned about my "gender performance" as I explored my queer and non-binary identity. Like Gabriel from the story, I often got messages from

people when they detected my femininity—rejection, neglect and a certain homophobia and transphobia. One day, my friend's dad came to our family's dinner table and paid us an "unexpected" visit, which ultimately changed my life. Later, it sparked the inspiration for the story of "The Little Prince(ss)."

As I worked on the story, more layers of reality started to unfold. A beautiful friendship and possible attraction between two Chinese American kids appeared; the two identities, Chinese American and gender non-binary, started to interact, overlap and blossom. Through the unfiltered minds of children, we see something precious, something they can see better than us: we've got to love our friends with an open heart and accept them for who they are.

At the same time, biased judgments and phobias from a traumatic adult world can disrupt and damage. Although it's been years since the incident happened to me, my healing has never stopped, and now I'm bringing the power of healing to others. I want to tell this story to every queer and trans child out there who is experiencing the turbulence and uneasiness of being different. I want to tell them that it is okay to be different and they should be very gentle with themselves. I hope that they will learn to be proud of who they are, because self-acceptance and self-love are generators for the power within us that no one can take away, and it's what makes us magical. It's what makes us royal, like a true prince(ss), since the beginning of time.

SCORING DISNEY'S "LAUNCHPAD" SEASON ONE SHORTS

To score their short films, half of the filmmakers chose composers with whom they'd worked previously, whereas others were open to new collaborations. Hao Zheng ("Dinner Is Served"), Jessica Mendez Siqueiros ("The Last of the Chupacabras") and Moxie Peng ("The Little Prince(ss)") fall into the former category, Aqsa Altaf ("American Eid"), Ann Marie Pace ("Growing Fangs") and Stefanie Abel Horowitz ("Let's Be Tigers") into the latter.

Xueran Chen, who earlier had scored Zheng's short "The Chef," earned his master's degree in Scoring for Film, Television and Video Games from the Berklee School of Music. Following an internship with Andrew Gross, in which he assisted in the scoring of the television film "The Secret Santa," he opened his own music studio in Los Angeles and has worked on many Chinese and American TV series, features and shorts, including "Princess Agents," "Love Actually," "Guardian," "Desert Sea, " "Speed," "Martial Universe," "Bodies at Rest" and "Running for Grace."

Renee Goust worked with Mendez Siqueiros on the filmmaker's previous short, "Pozole." With a unique Latinx sound, she had a clear vision of what she wanted to bring to "Chupacabras" and

used such authentic regional Mexican and Latin American instruments as the leona, quijada, jarana, requinto jarocho and zapateado.

Peng first teamed with Asian American composer Rob Rusli on their 2018 short “Melt.” Rusli is responsible for the scores of such independent features as “Test Pattern,” ”Empty by Design” and “Moko Jumbie,” as well as an episode of the Hulu series “Your Attention Please” and numerous shorts, including “Bambirak.”

Altaf’s dream was to work with Emmy®-nominated composer Siddhartha Khosla, who composed the scores of such feature films and TV series as “This Is Us,” “Beats,” “The Sounding,” “Fat Camp,” “Looking for Alaska,” “Runaways” and “Love, Victor.” A conversation between the two was arranged and, to her amazement, he agreed to score “American Eid.”

Powerhouse producer/GRAMMY®-nominated songwriter/mix engineer Adrianne Gonzalez (“AG”) composed the score for “Growing Fangs” and wrote and performs the original song used in the opening and end credits, “Medio Vivo.” She previously scored the documentary “Eat Drink Laugh: The Story of the Comic Strip” as well as the short films “Café Attitude” and “My Love,” and has written and performed songs for such TV series and films as “The Old Guard,” “Paranormal Activity 4,” “A Family Man,” “Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs & Shaw,” “Grey’s Anatomy,” “The Good Doctor,” “Vida,” “Elementary” and “Riverdale.”

Prior to scoring “Let’s Be Tigers,” Tangelene Bolton was already a part of the Disney Shorts family as the composer of the Short Circuit film “Just a Thought.” She’s scored dozens of shorts and has contributed additional music to the scores of such feature films, TV films and series as the upcoming “Pups Alone,” “All Rise,” “Shimmer and Shine,” “Brainchild,” “No Escape Room,” “The Art of Murder,” “60 Days In,” “House of the Witch” and “Altitude.” She’s a member of The Composers Diversity Collective and The Alliance for Women Film Composers.